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Montrose Apple Trees

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ARTICLE VII.

Corresponding members may be appointed from persons residing out of the County of Des Moines, who were residents of Iowa on June 1st, 1840.

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MONTROSE APPLE TREES.

[From the Iowa State Register.]

I have been informed that some interest has been elicited on the part of the public, by the publication in the *Register* of two or three communications from different persons, relative to a number of apple trees *still living* on the Mississippi River a short distance below the town of Montrose (formerly Fort Des Moines), in Lee county. The place is called in that neighborhood the "old apple orchard." I have not had an opportunity to read either of the communications, and therefore cannot judge as to their truthfulness, or to what extent the writers may have drawn upon their imagination to cover the history of the trees in mystery.

Having lived near these trees (a part of the time in sight of them) for more than a quarter of a century, I can testify to the fact that the apple trees are there, and that they have not been barren cumberers of the ground, but have been as prolific from year to year as most of their species. I have often eaten of their fruit, and can bear testimony that it is very good. But the question that interests the public is, how came

the trees there? What hand planted and protected them until they stood strong and tall like the forest trees with which they were intermingled and surrounded?

The spot they occupy, as well as all the surrounding country, was only a short time ago, comparatively, the home of Blackhawk and Keokuk, and their nations—the Sacs and Foxes.

I will here add that at the close of what is called the “Blackhawk War,” barracks were erected at Fort Des Moines (now Montrose) for the accommodation of a regiment of United States Dragoons. They occupied there till the spring of 1837—when the post was abandoned, and the Dragoons were stationed at the “Raccoon Fork,” which was immediately thereafter named “Fort Des Moines.” The same spring the name of the first Fort Des Moines was changed to Montrose.

A half-breed Indian of the Sac and Fox nation by the name of Red-Bird, (known among the whites as Thomas Abbott,) had his wick-e-up contiguous to the spot where these trees are, as early as 1790. He was often at Montrose in 1837–8–9. I knew him well. He was an intelligent and noble Indian. I have sat under these very trees with Red-Bird and others of his nation, and have had from his own lips what I believe to be a reliable history of these identical trees. The first time I saw them my curiosity was excited, and I took no little pains to ascertain the facts in relation to them. Red-Bird’s story was confirmed by Black Hawk and other aged Indians of the tribe. It was the custom of these Indians to make at least annual pilgrimages to St. Louis to visit their good father, Gen. Clark, agent of Indian affairs, and to receive the supply of blankets, &c.

Now, somewhere between 1795 and 1798, Red-Bird, then a young man, paid his annual visit to St. Louis in the early spring. On his return he stopped a few days at St. Charles, on the Missouri River, and when about to leave for home, a “Nish-E-Shin,” “Che-mo-co-man,” (good white man,) made him a present of about twenty very “petete” young apples trees, put up in a bundle, with the roots protected, and instructed him how to plant them near his own wick-e-up. Red-Bird

brought them all the way in his hand, and planted them promiscuously among the forest trees contiguous to his own home.

He protected them by placing stakes around them, and they grew up slim and tall, in consequence of being so much shaded.

I know it has been claimed or supposed by some, that Louis Honore Tesson, a Frenchman, planted these trees. He *did* stop awhile with Red-Bird, fleeing from some epidemic that prevailed for a time in St. Louis, and afterward by representations made to the Governor of Louisiana (then in possession of the French) that he had been of great service to their Government among the Indians at this point, and claiming also that he had purchased of these Indians a league square of land—got a permit from the Governor, as above, to enter, occupy and hold. In 1838, I held the legal possession of the mile square, (which embraces Montrose and this orchard,) when the heirs of Thomas S. Reddick, deceased, who was the assignee of Tesson, commenced suit against me in an action of right for the possession—[subsequently other parties defendant were substituted,]—which suit was finally decided in the Supreme Court of the United States in 1852.

But Red-Bird and other Indians often told me that Tesson was a very poor man—that he lived while there around in the different “wick-e-ups”—that they lodged and fed him—that he never furnished them with provisions, as he claimed—that he never purchased an acre of land of the Nation from those who had authority to sell. Red-Bird said he was a “che-wal-is-ki,”—(rascal.) I am entirely satisfied of the truth of Red-Bird’s story. But I did not intend, when I commenced writing, to tax you with anything more than a brief account of the apple trees.

D. W. KILBOURNE.

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